

Praise for *The House at the End of the Moor*

“No one writes action and page-turning tension like Michelle Griep! Filled with danger, romance, and faith, *The House at the End of the Moor* is sure to captivate readers everywhere.”

–Julie Klassen, bestselling author

“Filled with intrigue, danger, and toe-curling romance, *The House at the End of the Moor* is a masterful tale of redemption, forgiveness, and the beauty of restoration. A story to cherish!”

–Tara Johnson, author of *Where Dandelions Bloom*
and *Engraved on the Heart*

“An eerily, wonderfully written tale from master storyteller Michelle Griep. This book deserves a place of honor on your shelf!”

–Elizabeth Ludwig, *USA Today* bestselling author

“She must learn that love is stronger than fear. He, that forgiveness trumps rejection. Griep never disappoints, and she’s penned another winner in this heartfelt tale of vengeance and grace!”

–Shannon McNear, 2014 RITA® finalist and author of
The Cumberland Bride, *The Rebel Bride*, and *The Blue Cloak*

“Another masterpiece by Michelle Griep; *The House at the End of the Moor* is hauntingly beautiful and a must-have for every home library.”

–Ane Mulligan, Amazon bestselling author of
the Chapel Springs series

“The moors come alive in this tale of hidden souls, dangerous secrets, and burgeoning love. With echoes of the Brontë sisters and the deviousness of Dickens, Michelle Griep has spun a masterful tale of survival and love. I was captivated and did not escape until long after the end.”

–Jaime Jo Wright, author of *Echoes among the Stones* and
Christy Award–Winning *The House on Foster Hill*

“I couldn’t put this novel down. It has everything I want: a richly detailed and atmospheric historic setting, robust characters who grow from one chapter to the next, and timeless truths convincingly and naturally portrayed. Not only does *The House at the End of the Moor* sparkle with wit and wisdom, but the spiritual insight is seamlessly and powerfully delivered. Another impressive offering from Michelle Griep. I can’t wait for her next!”

—Jocelyn Green, award-winning author of *Veiled in Smoke*

“Michelle Griep is my go-to author for heart-throbbing hunks; independent, feisty heroines; and a story that not only warms but keeps my adrenaline raging. *The House at the End of the Moor* is no exception. Danger, suspense, mystery, and romance all wrapped up in a masterfully written historical novel that not only entertains but teaches a spiritual lesson you’ll not soon forget.”

—MaryLu Tyndall, award-winning author of
The Legacy of the King’s Pirates

“How can a tale be both eerie and yet filled with such light and hope? *The House at the End of the Moor* pulls you into another time and place, completely atmospheric and full of everything that is great about Gothic-style fiction. Griep uses meticulous research as well as her signature wit to craft a tale that will leave you feeling as if you have trod the moors and scaled the tors of southwest England with Oliver and Maggie.”

—Erica Vetsch, author of *The Lost Lieutenant*

“This sharply clever adventure captured me from gritty opening to brilliant finale! Griep has crafted a wonderfully terrible plight for her characters with a stunning conclusion and a romance that warms right through the pages. A true masterpiece of vivid creativity!”

—Joanna Davidson Politano, author of *Lady Jayne Disappears*
and other historical mysteries

THE
HOUSE
AT THE END
OF THE
MOOR

MICHELLE GRIEP

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In honor of Jocelyn Pagano, a stalwart warrior of the faith
who fought a brave battle for her life against a sinister enemy—cancer.
And as always, to the One who holds the power to vanquish
any enemy, no matter how malevolent, Jesus Christ.

Chapter One

March 1861

Dartmoor Prison, Devon, England

Death prowled the cellblock like a dark animal seeking prey—especially the weakest. But Oliver Ward would be hanged if he'd let the beast devour the man in the cell beside him. It wasn't fair. It wasn't right.

When the next spate of coughing ended, Oliver scooted close to the wall separating him from Jarney. "Listen, when Barrow comes by, lay low. I'll tell him you're not fit for work today."

"No, I cannot let you, my friend." Jarney's ragged voice leached through the stone blocks. Whenever a fever raged, his French accent grew thicker—and today it was viscous enough to blend the words into a syrupy mess.

Boots thumped. Keys jangled. Cell doors swung open and Barrow's barks permeated the perpetually damp air. Oliver clamped his mouth shut. Speaking when not spoken to by an officer was asking for a lashing, and half the time Barrow didn't even need a reason to strike.

A second later, the hinges of Oliver's door groaned. Officer Barrow's broad shoulders filled the doorway. His arms were a little too long. His mouth just a bit too wide. And if he had a neck, it was buried beneath a thick scruff of black whiskers.

"Out!" Barrow bellowed. "Daylight's a-wastin'."

Oliver's gaze climbed the grimy walls, slick with mould and stained to an oily brown by the guilt of men. Near the top, a barred open space let in cold air and light as grey as his evening gruel. Daylight? Hardly.

Even so, Oliver shoved to his feet. Tarrying would earn him a crack in the skull—not that what he was about to do would merit a lesser punishment. Chains clanking from the shackles on his wrists, he strode out of his cell and swung into place at the back of the line of other prisoners.

As soon as Barrow reached for Jarney's door, Oliver wheeled about. "Officer Barrow, sir! Jarney's ill. I'll take his share of work today."

"That so?" A slow smile slashed across Barrow's face.

The hairs at the nape of Oliver's neck stood out like wires. Barrow *never* smiled. Oliver swallowed against the tightness in his throat. "Yes, sir."

The three prisoners behind him turned, the whites of their eyes catching lantern light and flickering with interest. Anything, even something as mundane as a few words to an officer, generated curiosity. Boredom was as real a killer as the pox.

"Huh." Barrow grunted, his brows arching to his hairline—which wasn't far off. Crazy locks of bristly black shot out in all directions from beneath the man's hat. "I don't recall asking you about Jarney." Those same brows lowered, drawing into an ominous line. "But now that I know you're capable of doing more, I shall expect it. Oh, and Ward? No talking unless spoken to."

Barrow's fist shot out. Knuckles slammed into cartilage, which gave way with a sickening crunch. Oliver's head snapped back. He stumbled, barely catching himself before knocking into the man behind him.

Laughter bounced off the walls, mocking without words.

Blood dripped onto his lips. Oliver swiped it away with the back of his hand, then once again faced Barrow, undaunted. "For pity's sake, man! You'll get no work out of Jarney today. Let him rest, and he'll live to work tomorrow."

Barrow chuckled. "Never learn, do you, Ward? Just can't keep that pretty mouth of yours shut."

Oliver raised his fists, ready to parry—but too late. Barrow yanked

out his truncheon and whacked away, driving him to his knees as if he were naught more than a railroad spike to be pounded into the ground.

Blackness closed in. Sound receded, save for a bothersome buzzing and the muffled growl of Barrow ordering Jarney out of the cell.

Breathe. Just breathe.

Slowly, Oliver's vision crept back. Pain banged around inside his skull, radiating from crown to jaw. Turning aside, he spat out a mouthful of blood, then rose on shaky legs. One day Barrow would pay for his brutality—and Oliver could think of a hundred ways he'd like to see that justice served.

Jarney lurched out of the cell, shoring himself up with a hand on the wall, the chains on his wrists scraping against the rock. His hair hung in strings, hiding half his face, but he stood, thank God. He stood on his own. If he fell, Barrow would show no mercy.

Barrow slapped the end of his club against his open palm, the harsh sound making a point. "Let the thief no longer steal, but rather let him labour." His dark eyes drilled holes into Oliver and Jarney. "Therein shall ye find salvation."

Oliver blinked to keep from rolling his eyes, which would only invite another clout to the head. Officer Barrow fancied himself as the vicar of Dartmoor Prison, spouting scripture with as much gusto as a stiff eastern wind. He never got it quite right, though. A missing word. An added phrase. His own doctrines colouring God's precepts to a cadaverous shade. On the longest, coldest nights, Oliver often spent the black hours wondering if the man were Eden's snake come in human flesh.

"Move it!" Barrow smacked his club against the wall, the echo urging the five of them to turn about and tramp through the bowels of the prison.

It was a blessing, this broken nose of his. The stench in his own cell was putrid enough, but the reek in the passageways was worse. This time of day, when prisoners were yanked from their dark holes and hauled outside for manual labour, the opening and closing of

doors stirred all the noisome stinks and collected them into one big, eye-watering vapor trapped in the corridor. It used to gag him. Now it just annoyed.

As they mounted the stairs, he whispered over his shoulder. “Grab hold, Jarney. I’ll pull you up.”

Chains rattled. Fingers dug into his shirt. Hopefully Barrow wouldn’t notice Jarney’s grip on his shoulders.

The stairway opened into a large hall, a hub of activity. Convicts of worse crimes than his shuffled about in leg irons. Those who’d committed lesser offenses wore nothing but the wrinkled clothing they’d arrived in. But all had been issued shoes with nails pounded into the soles in the shape of an arrow—a dead giveaway should someone be reckless enough to escape, leaving a trail so obvious a blind bishop could follow. Oh, they were easy enough to take off, but running barefoot in the wild could mean death. If not from the nip of an adder, then from the bite of rocks and gorse on the moorland, which could cut through the toughest of flesh or callus.

And nothing but miles upon miles of moor surrounded the prison.

Oliver trudged along. Around him, guards prodded prisoners, some destined for meaningful work such as oakum picking, but most were headed for rock breaking. Only God and Barrow knew how Oliver and his cohorts would spend the long hours of this day. Personally, he hoped for oakum. It was hand-shredding work, but at least it served a purpose.

Before they turned down the passageway, a crab-like man, ruddy-skinned and hunchbacked, scuttled sideways over to them. One of his legs was shorter than the other, giving him an off-beat gait. It was a wonder Officer Whimpole was yet on the payroll.

“Hold up there, Mr. Barrow.”

As much as Oliver—and no doubt the rest of them—wanted to turn around and watch the exchange, to do so would mean time added to their service. And time was oft more brutal than the actual work.

Oliver strained to hear. A belch of damnation spewed out of Barrow, then he stomped to the front of their line and faced them. “Sorry,

girls. There's another matter to which I must attend posthaste. Officer Whimpole and Mr. Piggins will oversee you today." He aimed his index finger at the prisoners like the muzzle of a gun. "And if I hear that any of you give either of my colleagues so much as a crossed eye, I'll send you to your Maker. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" they shouted in unison.

Barrow stalked off. Whimpole took his place, making sure to handle the revolver at his side. He was an arthritic old coot, but no less deadly with that firearm loaded and ready to go.

"Outside." He tipped his head towards the front door. "The lot o' ye. Piggins has a wagon ready."

So...no oakum or rock breaking, then. And best of all, no Barrow. Oliver resisted the urge to make eye contact with Jarney, though the man had to be thinking what he was. Any little twitch might give him away—give *them* away—and this was too momentous an occasion for error. This might be it, though. The day. The show. The single moment Oliver had been counting on since he'd arrived in this hellhole.

Escape.

Whimpole pivoted and led the way. Mistake one. No guard should turn his back on his prisoners. Oliver flattened his lips to keep from smiling.

Outside, a cold blast of air drove misty rain sideways, cooling the hot throbbing of his nose. He hoisted Jarney into the back of the wagon while eyeing the big blob on the driver's bench, reins gripped in hands the size of mutton roasts. Mistake two. Piggins was as dull-witted as Whimpole was arthritic. The warden never should've paired them up. Surely this was a sign from God.

Oliver climbed into the wagon bed and sat beside Jarney, opposite the other three prisoners from their corridor. Snooks, Badger, and Flayne ignored them. Ignored each other. Ignored anything other than the sound of their own breathing. It was safer that way. Oliver had learned early on that self-containment could save your life, though he broke that rule for Jarney, a man as unrighteously accused as himself.

As soon as Whimpole pulled himself up and hunkered next to Piggins, the wagon rattled forward, and they left behind the grey hulk of Dartmoor Prison. Not that the surrounding countryside was any less forbidding. Unforgiving moorland stretched farther than the eye could see. Desolate. Dangerous. Whoever thought to put a prison in the middle of this godforsaken terrain was a genius.

As they bounced along, Oliver leaned towards Jarney. "Today's the day," he whispered.

"*Oui*, for you."

He narrowed his eyes. Was Jarney having second thoughts? "For us," he encouraged.

The wheels hit a rock, jostling them all. Oliver shored up Jarney with a grip to his arm.

His friend faced him, his skin as colourless as the pewter sky. "I will slow you down. I am not worth your getting caught."

Oliver slipped a glance at the other men. None looked their way. Not that they would've understood Jarney's accented words or heard his own above the rumble of the cart, but even so, Oliver lowered his voice to barely a whisper. "Don't be ridiculous. Every soul has value."

"Even Barrow's?"

He sucked in a breath. That stung. Of course Barrow was one of God's creatures—but so was a rat.

The wagon rattled onward and didn't stop until Whimpole shouted, "Ho!"

They halted near a breach in a sheep fence on the farthest reach of the prison grounds, where Whimpole turned to Piggins. "I'll take this one. Next break is bigger, near a half mile on. Ye'll see it. Swing back this way when ye're done, aye?"

Piggins's big head bobbed, and Whimpole lowered himself to the ground, a hammer in hand. "Ward and Jarney, out!"

Oliver gripped the wagon's backside and hauled himself over, chains clanking, then offered up a steadying grip as Jarney descended. His friend swayed when his feet hit the uneven turf. Oliver anchored him with a hand to his shoulder.

Whimpole threw the hammer at their feet. "Have at it, boys." Then he hunkered next to where the wall was yet whole, gun in his lap, protected from wind and rain. Mistake number three. Oliver hid a grin.

He retrieved the hammer and nodded for Jarney to follow him to the other side of the fence. A nearby cluster of sheep complained at their presence. Good. Their bleating noise combined with the occasional whoosh of wind off the moorland would cover up a whispered conversation. He turned to his friend. "This is it. You fetch rocks. I'll pound them, taking care to break my shackles as well. Then we'll switch places and you—"

"No." Sorrow etched lines in the grime on Jarney's brow. "I cannot make it. I will only slow you down. Once you are free of your chains, I will distract Whimpole and you run."

"I'm not going without you. You deserve justice every bit as much as I."

"And God will see to it, my friend." He gripped Oliver's arm in a weak hold. "Never lose hope."

"But we can do this! We can—"

The hammer of a gun ratcheted. So did Whimpole's voice, both overriding the noisy sheep. "Quit yer jawin' and get to work!"

"Yes, sir!" he and Jarney shouted and turned. Sweet mercy! Whimpole stood on the other side of the breach, three paces away. How had he drawn so near without a sound? Then again, it made sense the deadening whoosh of wind and baa-baaing sheep could just as well work against them as for them.

Jarney advanced a step, stumbling as the next gust nearly took him down. "Permission to haul rocks, sir?"

Whimpole lowered his gun and flipped up his collar against the rain, a growl rumbling in his throat. "Reuse what's fallen."

Oliver gained Jarney's side, mind whirring. If they weren't allowed to range farther into the moor, he'd have to come up with a different plan of escape, and, Lord, but he did not want to use violence. He motioned towards the ground. "Look for yourself, sir. The rocks here

are nothing but crumbs. We use those and we'll be back out here next month, guaranteed. Plus it'll take twice as long, since we'll have to—"

"All right! All right." Whimpole turned aside and spat. "Just get it done, but only one o' you retrievin' at a time. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

Apparently satisfied, Whimpole shambled back to his post against the wall. Jarney plodded off, shoulders wilting. From relief or from his fever? Oliver lifted his face to the rain, letting the fine spray wash away the blood left from Barrow's fat fist.

God, grant Jarney strength enough to leave this place behind—or grant me the power to carry him.

Stanchioned by faith alone, he set to work. Jarney hauled him a rock. He broke off the edges to fit snug against those on the wall—taking care to strike the iron hasp on his shackles every other swing. By the fifth stone, he'd added a layer to the fence and cracked the cuff-pin on his right wrist. Four more rocks, and the other was nearly freed.

But each successive trip cost Jarney more than the man could pay. Sweat dripped from his brow. Heat radiated off him in waves. His eyes sank deeper into the sockets, and blue rimmed his lips. This had to stop.

When Jarney handed him another rock, Oliver leaned in close. "We'll switch places after the next one, then you free yourself. I'll take on Whimpole, and we'll run."

Jarney nodded. . . or did he? Hard to tell when his friend shook so much from cold and exhaustion.

"You are a good friend, Ward. Truly. But I cannot make it. You know I cannot."

"But if we—"

"No!" Jarney's voice rang out surprisingly sharp.

Oliver tensed. That one little error could bring their wild attempt crashing down upon their heads. They both glanced in Whimpole's direction.

The man sat like a lump of coal, hat brim pulled down, shoulders

hunched. Had he dozed off?

Oliver unlocked his clenched jaw. "Jarney, listen to me."

"No, you listen." His friend's grey eyes burned into his. "Promise me you will run. Fast and far. Clear your name, then come back for me."

Oliver shook his head. "I cannot leave you. I *will* not. It isn't right."

"Yet it is the only way." Years and tears and lines carved deep into Jarney's face. "You'll not get another chance like this, and you know it."

A sigh ripped out of him. Blast! Was nothing ever right or good on this side of heaven?

"Get yer lazy backsides to work!" Whimpole growled, his head rising just enough to skewer them with a cancerous gaze.

And that was it. No more time to argue. To plan. To think.

Oliver gripped Jarney's arm. "I'll come back for you. I vow it."

A sad smile lifted half of his friend's blue lips. "Of course you will. Godspeed." Then he turned and staggered off.

Oliver's throat ached as he watched his friend pick his way over the mounded scrub, clutching his belly with one arm. How wicked the ways of men, when the poor must suffer while the rich wallowed in their wealth. He ought to know. He'd seen both sides.

White-hot fury rose up from his gut, choking him, and he swung the hammer. Hard. The wearied metal cracked and the shackle broke free.

"Stop!"

He froze. Heaven help him. Whimpole had seen.

But no. The guard shot to his feet and leveled his gun at the scarecrow shape edging across the desolate landscape. "That's far enough, Jarney. Get back here."

Jarney didn't so much as glance over his shoulder. He lumbered on, stumbling ahead, until the mist draped his form like a burial shroud, and he disappeared.

Whimpole heaved out a string of curses, then slip-ran in a cock-eyed gait after Jarney.

Godspeed, indeed.

Oliver yanked the bonds off his wrists, gouging flesh and not caring, then threw the chains to the ground. A minute later, his shoes lay beside them. Though he hated to take the time to do so, he ripped off the bottom half of his shirt and hastily tied the shreds around his feet, then picked up the hammer and took off at a dead run.

He followed the wagon trail. Ahead, the wall curved. He'd cut right, then tear onto the moor and—

A gunshot boomed. Flaming pain cut into his arm, and his step hitched. But he couldn't stop now. Not ever.

Sooner than he liked, he veered off into the rugged wasteland, a single burning prayer pumping hard with each heartbeat.

God, have mercy. God, have mercy!

Hopefully He would, for it would only be a matter of time before Piggins and the dogs were set loose after him. Or worse. Constable Barrow.

And then there'd be no mercy.

Chapter Two

*Three days later
The edge of Dartmoor, near Lydford*

Nights like these, when the wind shivers the bones of the great old house, ghosts of my past waft about unmoored. Inevitable, really. One can never fully leave behind the souls of those held dear.

Oh Papa, are you well? Are you safe? Do you even think of me?

Enough! Giving myself a mental shake, I shift in my chair and tilt my worn volume of *Jane Eyre* to catch more of the lamplight. The familiar words are my truest friends. Though I've read the thing countless times, the story never fails to thrill. As a girl, I anguished with Jane and longed for my own Mr. Rochester. But not once had I imagined that like my favorite heroine, I would be shut away here in an isolated house with secrets locked behind the doors. An eerie coincidence, that. Yet the comparison ends there. Jane had her Mr. Rochester to love. I have no one.

And never will.

A touch to my shoulder jolts me from my thoughts, and I peer up from the page to a peaked face. My maidservant, Nora, is every bit the timid little bird as Jane, standing there silent in her black gown and starched white apron. How she manages to keep so pristine even at this late hour is a testament to her ethics. The woman is driven beyond all distraction. Always tidy. Forever precise. Even the way she holds out the cup of tea for me is elegance perfected.

I lay the book in my lap and take the cup with a smile. "Thank you, Nora. Don't worry about the dishes. You've had a long day, so retire early if you like." I nod towards the scruffy sheepdog sprawled near the fire. "Malcolm and I shall be going to bed shortly."

At the mention of his name, Malcolm lifts his head. After a cursory glance to discover if any bones or mutton fat are involved, he plops his jowls back onto his paws and closes his eyes.

Nora nods, then leaves as quietly as she arrived. She belongs here, on the moor, appearing and vanishing like a mist.

Wind howls in through the loose windowpane near my elbow. The low moan garners an open eyelid from Malcolm. I turn my back to the draught and drink my tea in a few gulps, then rise. Better to curl up with my book beneath a warm counterpane than suffer the chill of a rousing spring tempest.

Bending, I collect my novel and saucer, then trade the warm sitting room for the cool of a dark corridor and head for the kitchen. The passageway twists, but no matter. I can roam it with my eyes shut now.

Paws pad behind me. I am Malcolm's sheep—the only one he herds and cossets. I found him on the moor that first week I arrived. He was half-dead, savagely beaten by a shepherd's rod. Whatever the crime, no dog deserves such a thrashing. To this day he favors his left foreleg, but it never stops him from racing over rocks and heath. I fancy we are a lot alike. Wounded but not overcome. Braver than anything life throws at us.

But that's a lie.

With a sigh, I pick my way to the washbasin. The first drops of rain pelt the window as I set down my empty cup, the clatter of porcelain against soapstone adding to the percussive beat. Malcolm brushes against my leg, and I pat him on the head. "Come, boy, off to bed with us."

A growl rumbles in his throat, and he tenses beneath my touch. My pulse quickens. Something's not right, not if he—

The door bursts open. I slap my hand to my chest, a strangled scream flying past my lips. My book plummets to the floor.

Wind and rain usher in a dark shape. Malcolm bounds ahead, greeting the intruder with a sloppy lick to his hand. I wilt against the sink, catching my breath.

“Steady on, Mrs. Dosett. Din’t mean to give ye a fright.” My manservant pulls off his hat and dips his big head. “My pardon to ye.”

“No pardon required, Dobbs.” I retrieve my book and shake it in the air, blaming my skittishness on a novel. “I ought not be filling my head with such vivid imaginings on a stormy evening.” Malcolm circles back and rejoins my side, and though he leans hard against me, I am grateful for his watchful care.

Dobbs hangs his hat on a peg and shrugs out of his coat, sucking in a breath as his arthritic shoulder catches on the fabric. Despite his age and ailments, he is a tree. A bit bent, but an ancient, sturdy oak, as hardworking as Nora.

But that doesn’t stop me from verifying his tasks are completed. “You took care of the burn pile?”

“Before the rain started.”

“The barn door is secured?”

“Tight as a cork in a bottle.”

I step away from the washbasin. “Only after the animals were settled, though, yes?”

“Aye, but I don’t mind telling ye I had a hard time of it, especially with ol’ Black Jack, the rascal. I’ve yet to meet a giddier pony.” He secures his greatcoat on a peg next to his hat, then faces me. “Not that I blame the beast, mind. There’s a wicked wind coming off the moorland, more than just blowsy. Got an edge to her, the sort that curdles the blood. The Whist Hounds’ll be roaming tonight, and that’s for certain.”

I press my lips flat. Dartmoor residents are steeped in superstition, inmates of their own fearful penitentiaries. But are we not all captives to our singular peculiarities?

I grip my book in both hands and lift my chin. “Good thing we are snug in the house then, hmm? And with that thought, I bid you good night.”

I retrace my steps past the worktable, but as I reach the door, Dobbs calls out. “Might I have one more word, missus?”

I turn. So does Malcolm. “Of course.”

“Been meanin’ to speak with ye since this afternoon.” Dobbs draws near, his boots falling heavy on the stone tiles. “When I were in the village today, old Nacker gave me a note from my sister o’er in Thorndon Cross. She’s ailin’ and asking me to stop by. Wondered if ye could get along without me for a week or so?”

Absently, I reach for Malcolm’s head and twine my fingers in his fur. “Is it that serious?”

“Dunno ’til I go.”

“I suppose you are right.” My brow folds, and I’m glad the shadows hide it. It won’t do to have him reading my thoughts. I hate the idea of Dobbs leaving. A manservant is a necessary evil—one I am loath to part with.

I relish the silky feel of Malcolm’s fur, a solid reminder that he will be here for me, no matter what. “When would you leave?”

“First light, weather permittin’.”

“I see. Well. . .” It’s rude to hesitate. Offensive to even consider denying his request. But do I have enough supplies on hand until he returns to avoid making a trip into the village? Or—for shame! What am I thinking? I release my hold on Malcolm, heat burning up to my ears. Have I become as self-centered as those I fled from in the first place?

I flash him a smile. “Go then, and with my prayers for your sister’s speedy return to good health.”

He bows low. “Many thanks. I’ll be back a’fore ye know I’m gone. I wager ye and Nora will be safe enough without me. Oh, and missus?” He dares a step closer, and Malcolm immediately wedges his body between us. “I know yer penchant for walking, but leastwise while I’m gone, take a care and stay close to the house, aye? Many a man has met his end in a bog or a crag or a’followin’ a pixie. I won’t be near ’bouts to help should ye cross a patch o’ trouble.”

True. I’ve heard the tales of those lost and ruined on the moor. I turn, calling over my shoulder as I tread into the shadows. “Thank you, Dobbs. I shall keep that in mind.”

And I will. . .but honestly, it is not the moor that I fear.